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ABSTRACT

This guide is divided into 11 sections, each containing a number of questions and suggestions for conducting successful folklore and oral history interviews. Section 1, "Settlement and Dwellings," deals with the physical environment, local inhabitants, houses and outbuildings, and public buildings. Section 2, "Livelihood and Household Support," contains questions about local industry, crops, and women's work. Section 3, "Communications and Trade," addresses travel by land, air, and water; spreading news and information; and business and commerce. Section 4, "The Community," deals with people, work, clothes, social intercourse, family relationships, religion, education, fire fighting, and legal administration. Section 5, "Human Life," looks at birth, marriage, death, and the return of the dead. Section 6, "Nature," explores beliefs about the sky, the atmosphere, plants, birds, mammals, fish, insects, and snakes. Section 7, "Medicine," addresses doctors, dentists, non-professional medical help, home remedies and treatment, and veterinary medicine. Section 8, "Time," examines the seasons and holidays. Section 9, "Entertainment: Sports and Pastimes," deals with games, music, dancing, storytelling, reading, phonographs, radio, and television. Section 10, "Personal Comments," allows interviewees to add their own opinions or speculations. Section 11, "Historical Tradition," questions what interviewees consider to be historically significant in their local area. This guide has a clear orientation toward interviewing older people in a rural setting about how things used to be. Questions can be adapted to suit other needs. (GEA)

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A General Interview Guide

by Edward D. Ives

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A GENERAL INTERVIEW GUIDE

What follows is in no sense exhaustive or complete. I started from O'Sullivan's Handbook of Irish Folklore (that's where the basic structure comes from), and then I adapted it to the scene here in the Northeast by adding some questions and changing others. For any one of the aspects covered here, you can get more suggestions by looking at O'Sullivan's work.

I don't recommend trying to work straight through this guide with an informant. Nor do I particularly recommend interviewing with "guide in hand", and I'm dead against it for the first interview. Read the Guide through a few times before you go out. Then, when you go back for further interviews, you can use this guide to help you work up good questions. And don't forget to probe, to follow up, to get fuller explanations ("Did that ever happen to you?" "Can you give me an example?" And, of course, "Who, what, where, when, why?").

You will notice that this Guide has a clear orientation toward interviewing "older" people in a rural setting about how things used to be. That orientation is a function of my own lifelong historical interests. If you are more interested in present than remembered culture, you can adapt the questions to suit yourself.

The compiling of a Guide like this is an on-going thing. Some of the questions will turn out to be absurd or even (God save the mark) counterproductive. And there are good questions that should be asked that aren't in here. The whole thing is also very uneven. Some aspects of experience are covered rather thoroughly while others are barely suggested. Let us know how we can improve this guide. Meantime, here is something for those many people who have asked, "What do I say then?"

e.d.i.

I. SETTLEMENT AND DWELLINGS.

A. Local Settlers and Inhabitants.

1. Who were the first settlers around here?
2. Where did they come from?
3. When did your family first arrive here?
4. Why did they come here?
5. Have you ever heard what life was like back then?
6. Were there ever any Indians around here?
7. Ever hear of the red paint people?

B. The Township and Its Environs.

1. How did the town get its name?
2. Was all the land around here owned locally?
3. Was there any land around here that was just sort of considered common land?
4. Where is the best land around here? Worst?
5. Did there used to be more people around here than now?
6. If so, why did they leave?
7. Are there any sections in town where people used to live?
8. Where were the outlying farms? Whose were they?

C. Orientation.

1. What towns were "nearby"? Close enough to visit?
2. What was the nearest "town"? Was this where you did your business? How often would you go there? How did it impress you? Do you remember your first trip there?
3. Would you ever go to other towns of comparable size nearby?
4. Were there many "strangers" about?
5. How would you get places?
6. Did you ever go to Canada?
7. Were there many Canadians around here?

D. The House and Outbuildings.

1. House.
    a. When was this house built? By whom?
    b. Was it always this size or has it been added to, parts lost, etc.?
    c. How is it heated? Now? Formerly? When converted?

d. Have you always lived there?
e. How many rooms? Name them.
(1) Attic. What was put here?
(2) Bedrooms. Did you have your own when you were a kid?
(3) Living room or parlor?
(4) Kitchen? How about a summer kitchen?
(5) Dining Room?
(6) Hallways?
(7) Cellar?
(8) Other? (e.g., closets or other storage spaces)

2. Ell.
3. Shed.
4. Barn.
a. Was the barn connected to the house?
b. Is that a good arrangement?
c. Why was it arranged that way?
5. Privy.
a. Where located?
b. When did you get indoor plumbing?
c. If a man had to urinate, would he go to the outhouse?
6. Other outbuildings?
7. Did you and other people have "camps" around here?

E. Public buildings and their use.
1. Town hall?
2. Schools?
3. Grange Hall?
4. Stores?
5. Churches?
6. Other?

F. Miscellaneous.
1. Any haunted houses around here?
2. What was the biggest or best house around here?

II. LIVELIHOOD AND HOUSEHOLD SUPPORT

A. Commissary.

1. What food did you raise yourself?
2. What food did you have to buy?
3. How would you "preserve" vegetables? Meat?
4. Did you do your own butchering?
5. Did game form a significant part of your food supply?
6. Alcoholic beverages? Home made? Purchased? Where? Any bootleggers?
7. How many meals a day were there? What were their names? When did they come? What was the "main" meal?
8. At this point you can explore the whole area of meals. How served, where people sat at the table, menus, cleaning up afterwards, etc. (The "guide" needs a lot of development at this point).
9. Was "Sunday dinner" special? How?
10. Who did the cooking? Did she have help? From whom? Did the men ever cook?
11. Were there traditional family recipes? How about family nicknames for special dishes (e.g., in one family, the father occasionally fixed a delicious dish which everyone, himself included, called "Pop's Garbage").

B. Livelihood: (The basic question being what did the informant and others do around here to earn a living or sustain themselves).

1. Farming:
    a. Crops?
    b. Livestock?
    c. Horticulture?
    d. Chickens?
2. Lumbering:
    a. On one's own property?
    b. Into the woods?
3. Fishing. (include guiding)
4. Trapping.
5. Hunting. (include guiding)
    a. Were there any restrictions on hunting?
    b. Were there places where it was illegal to hunt?
    c. Did people around here ever post their land?

d. Who were the game wardens? Local? From away?
e. Were there many hunters from away?

6. Local trades and crafts (i.e., within the community--how a person might make or augment his living).
    a. blacksmith or farrier?
    b. shoemaking (cobbling)?
    c. storekeeping?
    d. inn-keeping?
7. Woman's work. (especially over and above quotidian tasks: what might a woman do to make a little extra money?)

III. COMMUNICATIONS AND TRADE

A. Land Travel
1. Roads.
    a. Get the names of different roads.
    b. How did it get that name?
    c. Who built it and when?
    d. How were the roads maintained?
    e. Are there any abandoned roads around here?
2. Paths and short-cuts. From where to where?
3. Bridges.
4. Conveyance: There are several basic things here that you should investigate under each category. To wit:
    a. What modes of conveyance were used to reach what places and to cover what distances (e.g., if you wanted to visit the next farm, would you walk, ride a horse, hitch up the wagon, or get in the truck even if you didn't have a load to carry)?
    b. Was how you traveled in any way a function of how old you were (e.g., would a kid walk to the store while his father would ride or drive)?
    c. Were there modes, distances, purposes for which a woman or child might travel alone and on his/her own?
    d. How has all of this changed over the years? (The following suggestions should be thought of as merely specific addtional questions to the general ones outlined above)

e. Walking: Did you ever walk just for pleasure? Snowshoes: how often used and for what purposes? Did anyone around here ever use skiis?
f. Horseback: What tack was used? How did girls ride (i.e., astride)?
g. Wagons and Carriages? Get details on different kinds and what they were used for.
h. Sleds and Sleighs.
i. Automobiles and trucks? Can you recall the first car around here? Who bought it? When, etc.? When did you get your first car?

B. Water Travel.
1. Get into the whole business of rowboats and canoes of various types. What were they used for? Where?
2. When did motors first come in (outboards, inboards)?
3. Did you ever travel by boat, say, to Bangor, Portland, Boston? Out of where?

C. Air Travel.
1. Do you remember hearing about Kitty Hawk (Dec. 17, 1903)?
2. When did you see your first plane?
3. Have you ever flown?

D. Spreading news and information.
1. Newspapers.
a. What paper(s) did people around here read?
b. How was it distributed?
c. Did it contain local news?
d. How did local news get into the paper?
2. Magazines.
3. Radio.
4. Postal Service.
a. Did you write and receive many letters?
b. How was the mail delivered? Frequency?
5. Telephone.
a. Did you have a telephone?
b. When was it installed?
c. Was there much listening in on a party line?
6. Announcements, Alarms, etc.
a. Was there a town bulletin board for posting public notices?

b. Was there a fire alarm? (See also IV-H)
c. How would you learn about, say, a death?
d. Was there a lot of gossip?

E. Business and Commerce.
1. Local Stores.
a. Were there any stores locally?
b. What could you buy there?
c. What was it like (i.e., a room in someone's house, a separate building, etc.)
2. Peddlers.
3. Mail order.
4. Market town. Where was it? [See also I.C.2-3]
5. Miscellaneous.
6. How much was hard money, how much barter?

IV. THE COMMUNITY

A. People.
1. Were there ever many strangers around?
2. Was there much migrant or seasonal labor that would come into the area?
3. Did people from here ever go elsewhere to work (like into the woods)?
4. Were there any families around here who were thought of as "rich" or "poor"? What did that mean?
5. Who were your nearest neighbors?
6. Who were your best friends?
7. Were there any people around here that you especially admired or looked up to (outside of your family)?
8. Were there any "characters" around?
9. Did you ever know anyone "famous"?
10. Was there anyone around noted for his strength?
11. Was there anyone around who used to make up songs or poems?
12. Anyone around you thought of as an especially good singer? Storyteller? Liar?
13. Anyone around here who could stop blood, heal, read the future, "do things," (i.e., had supernatural power of any sort?).

B. Work.
1. Get as detailed a description of the different tasks normally apportioned to men, women, boys, girls, children, old people. Some general questions:

2. Who got up first in the morning?
3. How about a man or woman living alone?
4. Did people ever team up to help each other? On what occasions?
5. Did people have hired men? Describe this arrangement (where did he stay, eat, how paid, etc.).

C. Clothes.

1. Where did you get new clothes (in town, mail order, made at home)?
2. Was there a special time for getting them, like Easter or before school started?
3. What would everyday dress consist of?
4. What sort of thing would you get "dressed up" for?
5. What would dressing up amount to?
6. How about hand-me-downs?

D. Social Intercourse.

1. Evenings at home.
2. Visiting or calling.
    a. Arranged ahead of time or would you just "drop in"?
    b. When? Sunday? Holidays?
    c. What would go on (gossip, men talk to men, women talk to women, etc.)?
    d. Would there usually be something to eat or drink? At what point?
    e. How long would you be apt to stay (or what would "staying too long" amount to)?
    f. Did music play any part in a visit (songs, fiddle)?
3. Parties and dances (get as much information as you can on different kinds of parties, how they were structured, refreshments, etc.)
    a. Some names: kitchen breakdown, spree, time, ball.
    b. From how far would people come?
    c. Who provided the music?
    d. What kind of dances were performed?
    e. What else went on besides dancing?
    f. Were there certain places and times when dances were regularly held?
    g. Was fighting or drinking ever much of a problem?

4. Clubs and societies.
    a. Were there debating clubs, literary clubs, or???
    b. What were their purposes?
    c. When did they meet? Where?
    d. Who belonged (and, maybe, who didn't)?
    e. Did they sponsor entertainments?
    f. Were there local ball teams?
    g. Were there any "gangs" or "bands" that were not perhaps of official organizations but everyone knew of them?
    h. Where did young people traditionally "hang out"? When (after supper? after school?)?
5. Grange.
    a. Was there a Grange hall?
    b. When did it meet?
    c. What went on at the meetings?
    d. Was it important locally?
    e. Who did and did not belong?
6. Circuses and Travelling Shows.
    a. Did such things come to this town? Where?
    b. If not, would they come close enough to allow you to go?
    c. How about "Chautauqua"?
7. Fairs.
    a. Where was the county fair held? When?
    b. Did you usually go?
    c. Was it a big event? Did people look forward to it and plan for it?
    d. Can you remember the first one you went to?
8. Taverns and bars.
    a. Were there any locally?
    b. Did women ever go to them?

E. Social and Family Relationships.
1. General.
    a. How far back can you trace your family?
    b. Were there any "famous" people in your family?
    c. Is there, say, one grandfather whose tradition seems to be dominant?
    d. What stories have come down to you about your parents? Grandparents? Ancestors?
    e. Are there certain things in your family history that you'd like to know about but that no one will talk about?

f. Is there any notorious or infamous character in your family's past? Do people like to talk about him/her or not? Do you feel that the infamy may have grown or been elaborated on as the stories passed along?

g. How did your parents (grandparents) come to meet and marry?

h. Are there any stories of lost love, jilted brides, unusual courtships, arranged marriages, elopements, runaway lovers or some such matters in your family?

i. Have any historical events affected your family? For example, how did your family survive the depression? Did conflict over some national event like the Civil War or Vietnam cause a serious break in family ties?

j. Are there any stories in your family about how a great fortune was lost or almost (but not quite) made? If a fortune was made, who was responsible and how was it achieved?

k. Does your family hold reunions? How often? When? Where? Who is invited? Who comes? Who are the organizers? Hosts? What occurs at a reunion? Are there traditional foods, customs, activities? Are stories or photographs exchanged? Are any kinds of records kept? By whom?

l. What other people (friends, household help, etc.) have been incorporated into your family? Are there any "courtesy" aunts or uncles?

m. Is there a family cemetery or plot? Who is buried with whom? Who makes burial place decisions? If there are grave markers, what type of information is recorded on them?

n. Does your family have any heirlooms, objects of sentimental or monetary value that have been passed down? What are they? Do you know their origin and line of passage through the generations? Are there any stories connected with them? If they come to you, will you continue the tradition?

2. Immediate family.

a. How many were there in your family?

b. Where were you in the family (oldest, youngest)?

c. Tell me about your brothers, sisters. Where they went, what they did, where they are now, etc.
d. Did your grandparents live nearby? Did you used to go see them? etc.
e. Any uncles or aunts whom you remember?
f. When did you get married?
g. How many children have you had? Where are they now?

3. Discipline and Decisions. (These are big subjects, and some investigators have had full time projects going on just one of them. But see what you can do).
   a. As a rule, who took care of disciplinary matters within the family?
   b. Would your mother handle routine matters and then call in father on bigger things or as a sort of ultimate threat ("I'm going to tell your father!")?
   c. What sorts of punishment were used for what sort of misbehaviour?
   d. Conversely, did they ever use rewards for good behavior?
   e. Did you use different methods than your parents to discipline your own children?
   f. Do you think your parents were too strict with you? Do you think you did a better job disciplining your kids than your parents did with you?
   g. Decisions. It might be best to ask about specific kinds of decisions, or even more specific decisions.
   h. Sample decision situations: Moving. New car. New clothes. (Could children make their own choices?) Going visiting. Place of burial. Interior decorating. Gardening. Vacation spot.
   i. Were there specific areas where the decisions were made jointly, by the father, or by the wife?

4. Names.
   a. What do you know about your family surname? Its origin? Its meaning? Did it undergo change coming from the "old country" to North America? Are there any stories about this change?

b. Are there any traditional first names or middle names in your family?
c. How about nicknames? How did they originate? Were they "permanent" or just temporary? Was it all right for some people to use the nickname (call somebody by his nickname) but not others?
d. Is there a naming tradition in your family, such as always giving the first son the name of his paternal grandfather?
e. How about names within the family? What did you call your father (Father, Dad, Pop)? Mother (Mom, Mother, Ma)? Sisters? Brothers? Were there sort of traditional family names you'd use in private but not to his/her face (Father was "the Gaffer," "the old man," "the Guv'ner")?

5. Pets.

a. Did you have pets? Cats? Dogs?
b. Who took care of them?
c. Could they be in the house? Barn only? What kind?
d. Was there one that you were especially fond of?
e. Did you ever have a pet pig or cow? Wasn't this hard on you when it was butchered?
f. Did you ever have a pet wild animal?
g. How were animals named?

F. Religion.

1. General.

a. Would you say people around here were religious?
b. What church did you go to? How often? Etc.
c. Was there more than one church?
d. Did you go to Sunday school? Did your children?
e. Where did the preacher come from?
f. Did the church sponsor many social events: socials, covered-dish suppers, strawberry festivals?
g. Were there any "sects" around here that were considered "odd" or "strange"?

G. Education.

a. Where did you go to school?
b. Where was the local school?
c. How long did it take to get there?
d. How big a school was it?
e. Can you describe a typical day?
f. Can you remember pranks you used to play?
g. What time would it let out and when would you get home?
h. Was there any subject you liked better than others?
i. How far did you go in school?
j. Why did you stop? Was this about where everyone else stopped?
k. Did you ever think of continuing?
l. Did others from around here go on?
m. Was the teacher(s) from around here or from far away?
n. Did your children have better schooling than you did?

H. Fire Fighting.

a. Did you have a fire department?
b. How was it run?
c. How much equipment did it have?
d. Where was apparatus kept?
e. How effective do you think it was?
f. Do you remember any notable fires?

I. Legal Administration.

1. Who represented the "law" around here (Constable, troopers, border patrol, wardens, sheriff)?
2. How did you feel about them (generally to be avoided? There to help?)
3. What sort of thing might you retain a lawyer for?
4. How much of a problem were any of the following: theft, manslaughter, murder, assault, moonshining, disturbing the peace?
5. Poaching (that may be too strong a word, but try it):
    a. Were there well-known poachers in the area?
    b. Why did people kill game illegally? (To put meat on the table? Supply hunters from away with trophies? Protect crops?)

c. How effective were the wardens?
d. How about illegal methods: baiting, jacking, dogging, set-guns, etc.?

[In general, try to find out how disputes or problems of this sort were handled. To what extent could problems be settled person-to-person, to what extent within the community, and at just what point would anyonoe go beyond that.]

V. HUMAN LIFE

A. Birth.

1. Were you born in a hospital or at home?
2. How about your children?
3. If you were born at home, was that the usual thing around here?
4. Did you have a doctor or was the delivery aided by a midwife or what?

B. Marriage. (In all of this, try to determine what was "typical," too).

1. Where did you meet your wife? How?
2. How long did the courtship last? Can you describe it?
3. Did anyone around here ever elope?
4. Was it cutomary for a man to ask the father's permission?
5. Can you describe your own marriage ceremony?
6. Was there a reception?
7. Did you take a honeymoon?
8. Was there a "serenade" or a "chivaree" or anything of that sort?
9. Did you move into your own place right away or did you move in with your/her parents for awhile?

C. Death.

1. Did people around here usually die in the hospital or at home?
2. Who prepared the body for burial, and what was done?
3. Was there a visiting time or a wake?
4. Did people sit up with the dead?
5. Where did you get the coffin?
6. How long was it between death and burial?

D. Return of the dead.

1. Did you ever hear of anyone seeing a dead person return (a ghost)?
2. Have you ever seen such a thing?
3. What do you think of this business?
4. Do you think that there are sometimes forerunners or warnings of a coming death (dog howling, three knocks on door, dream, sudden feeling, etc.)?

VI. NATURE

A. The Sky.

1. As a child, did you ever wonder how far up the sky went?
2. Could you tell time by the sun?
3. Do you know any constellations?
4. Did you ever see a comet?
5. It's hard to get at this sort of thing, but did you ever "look" at the stars, just because they were beautiful?

B. The Atmosphere: (Following O'Sullivan's categories, go for weather lore especially)

1. Short term predictions. What signs foretold fair weather, foul weather, storms, snow, etc.?
2. Long term predictions: What signs foretold a hard winter, an early spring, drought?
3. Could anything be done about the weather: rainmakers, etc.?

D. Plants.

1. Do you know any plants that have healing properties?
2. Do you have a favorite wildflower?
3. Did you ever plant flowers around the house?
4. Do you enjoy flowers yourself?

E. Birds.

1. Were you at all interested in birds for their own sake?
2. What ones do you recognize?
3. Do you have a favorite bird?
4. What birds were considered "pests" and what was done about them?

F. Mammals.

1. What could you do to get rid of the smell of a skunk?
2. How plentiful were deer around there?
3. Were there more moose years ago than now?
4. When did you last see a moose?
5. Is moosemeat any good?
6. Any bears around there?
7. Did you ever see or hear of the 'bear plug"?
8. What was the "Injun Devil"? Did you ever see one?
9. What's the smartest animal in the woods?
10. What animals were considered "pests" and what was done about them?

G. Fish.

H. Insects.

1. What's the blackfly season around here?
2. What can you do about them?
3. What do you do for a bee sting?

I. Snakes, etc.

1. What kinds of snakes are around here?
2. Ever hear of a hoop snake?

VII. MEDICINE

A. Doctors.

1. Where was the nearest doctor (name)?
2. What would you go to a doctor for (i.e., when was one sick enough to require a doctor?)
3. Would the doctor come to the house?
4. Where was the hospital?
5. Have you ever had to go to the hospital?

B. Dentists.

1. Where was the nearest dentist?
2. Did people go to the dentist for preventive work?

C. Local Medical Help (non-professional).

1. Was there anyone around here who could "doctor" in any way?
2. Anyone around here who could stop blood?

3. Anyone who could kill pain, stop toothache, etc.?
4. Anyone who knew more than most about herbs, etc.?

D. Home Remedies and Treatment.
   1. What would be done for the various ailments that one treated at home?
   2. Who handled that sort of thing in the family (mother, father, self?)

E. Veterinary Medicine.
   1. Were there vets around here? Where?
   2. What would he be called in for and what sorts of things would you handle yourself?

VIII. TIME

A. Seasons.
   1. Are the winters as hard now as they were years ago?
   2. What is the worst winter you recall?
   3. What signs of spring do you always look for and notice?
   4. What about "January thaw"?

B. Holidays. (There are a host of questions one could ask about any holiday. Try to find out how that holiday was observed around here.).
   1. General: New Year's, Valentine's Day, Easter, May Day, Memorial Day, 4th of July, Halloween, Thanksgiving, Christmas.
   2. Personal and family: Birthdays, Anniversaries, Family Reunions, Other?

IX. (O'Sullivan's Chapter XIV) **ENTERTAINMENT: SPORTS AND PASTIMES** (This is all very general, and a lot of this same material will probably come up elsewhere. Try to get the context, of course, for any item.)

A. Games.
   1. Children's games.
   2. Adults (include card games).

B. Music.
   1. Did you play an instrument?
   2. How did you learn?
   3. Singing?

C. Dancing and Dances (see IV.D.3 above).

D. Storytelling.
   1. Was there anyone around when you were growing up who used to tell you stories? Did you tell stories to your children?
   2. Is there anyone around now who you think is a great storyteller?
   3. Where and on what occasions would the persons named in 1 and 2 tell stories?
   4. What kinds of stories would they tell?

E. Reading.
   1. Are you a "reader"?
   2. What sorts of things do you like to read?
   3. Did your parents read to you when you were a child?
      a. Which parent, and when?
      b. What can you recall them reading?
   4. Did you read to your children?
   5. Where did you get books (around the house, library, bookstores, mail order)?
   6. Do you or did you subscribe to any magazines?

F. Did you have a victrola?
   1. Where did you get your records?
   2. What sort of thing did you enjoy listening to?

G. Radio.
   1. What stations could you get here?
   2. When did you get your first radio?

H. Television.

X. PERSONAL COMMENTS

(Some of these questions may be appropriate, others may not. But if you think you could get answers to any of them, great.)

A. What "turning points" do you see in your life?

B. What do you see as the "best" or "happiest" time of your life (or, if you could return to just one time, what would it be?)

C. If you had your life to live over again, what would you do that was different?

D. Do you see any great opportunities missed?

E. Do you think your children have a better life than you did?

F. Do you think you've led a better life than your parents did?

G. Did your life turn out the way you thought it would?

H. Did you ever think you'd like to write a book
   a. about yourself?
   b. about something else?

I. What do you think about what I'm doing?

XI. (O'Sullivan's Chapter XI). **HISTORICAL TRADITION** (see also IV.A)

A. What is the most important historical event you've personally been involved in or with?

B. If you were writing a history of this area, what specific events do you think would be the most interesting and important to include (N.B. If the person needs some help, try the following schedule--preferably in this order--to see if he/she feels they are "important" enough to be "history".)
   1. Natural disasters: floods, fires, quakes, droughts.
   2. Serious accidents or calamities.
   3. Murders or other notable crimes.
   4. (then and only then) Wars. National Politics (and this community's part in them).
   5. What are the greatest changes you've seen?
   6. Was there much smuggling around here?
   7. How were things around here during prohibition?
   8. How did the depression hit around here?